



Photo by: John Slivoski

tics. The vulture's head is bald for a reason. They are constantly sticking their heads into the gut cavity of a rotting carcass. By being bald, they don't get a nasty mess on their feathers. Vultures can gobble up a road kill and regurgitate the ingested contents, hurling the vomit at an attacker. The resulting horrible odor is so offensive that the attacker will run away. Vultures also release urine down their legs to clean off and kill the bacteria that collects on the birds as they hop around in the rotting flesh of their food items. The urine may also aid in cooling the birds off during hot weather. Even though the habits and characteristics of the vulture seem to be very gross, it serves a very important service to man, proving that everything in Nature has a purpose. Imagine the smell that would be created by the rotting flesh of all the animals killed on our highways or that die from natural causes in the woods and weeds around our homes. The vulture efficiently reduces a decaying carcass to a pile of bones and later distributes their ingested contents over the countryside as fertilizer.

## Ten Fast Facts About the Vulture

1. Although classified as a bird of prey, recent DNA studies show the vulture may be more closely related to storks.
2. Seven species of the vulture exist in North America, including the California Condor with its 10 foot wing span.
3. Vultures can draw their heads partially back into their bodies to stay warm.
4. Vultures are also referred to as buzzards.
5. While Turkey Vultures like to feed alone, the social Black Vultures feed in groups.
6. The vulture makes no noises except hisses and grunts when disturbed.
7. Both Black Vultures and Turkey Vultures may share the same roost.
8. Vultures may sit stationary with their wings spread to absorb heat from the sun.
9. Turkey Vultures have a greater migration area than the Black Vultures.
10. Latin names for Turkey Vultures and Black Vultures are *Cathartes aura* and *Coragyps atratus* respectively

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# The Vulture: Philpott's Sanitary Engineer

## Philpott Lake



Artwork : State of Missouri





Vermont Institute of Natural Science

Two types of vultures reside in the Philpott area. The Turkey Vulture is a very big bird reaching a length of 32 inches and having a wing span of 6 feet. It has an overall brownish black color and a bald red head, resembling that of a Wild Turkey. The beak is white and the Turkey Vulture has yellow feet. The Turkey Vulture exists in a very wide range of habitats from deserts to grasslands to tropical forests. It is found over most of the lower 48 states through Central America and most of South America. The Turkey

Vulture can be seen lazily soaring, rarely flapping its wings as it rocks slightly from side to side. The Turkey Vulture holds its wings upward in a slight V-angle called a dihedral as it flies. Its long tail extends beyond its legs



Photo by:  
Gene Oleynik

while in flight. The Black Vulture is slightly smaller than the Turkey Vulture. It has a wing span of 4 1/2 to 5 feet. Its length

ranges from 23 to 27 inches. The Black Vulture has a black featherless head and has a white patch on the underside of its wing near the tip. Its tail is very short and square on the end. Because of its shorter wing span it has to flap its wings more to maintain its altitude. The Black Vulture is common throughout the Southeastern United States through most of South America. The Black Vulture holds its wings flat while in flight. Neither species of vulture builds a nest. Instead, they may deposit their eggs on the ground under a bush, in a large hollow tree, on a rocky ledge, or even in an abandoned building. Two eggs are usually laid, rarely three. Both the male and female vultures take turns incubating the eggs. When the baby vultures hatch, they are covered with cream colored downy feathers.



Vultures are well known for their eating habits. Both local species feed primarily on carrion from the carcasses of dead animals. Speeding traffic on our back roads provides the vultures with much of their food. Turkey Vultures locate their food both by scent and by sight. This is very unusual, since most birds have a very poor sense of smell. The part of the brain that is responsible for processing scents is particularly large in



comparison to other birds. This increased ability allows the Turkey Vulture to find a dead animal such as a gray squirrel even under several inches of leaves on the forest floor. Black Vultures, on the other hand, lack this enhanced ability to detect scents and rely on their sharp eyesight to find food. On occasion, the keen-nosed Turkey Vulture will descend on a carcass to dine, only to be followed by Black Vultures, which have been watching closely from above. The more aggressive Black Vultures may run their red-headed cousins away and enjoy the meal for themselves. Unlike the Turkey Vulture, Black Vultures have been known to take live prey, including newborn calves and lambs and have even been known to run down live skunks. In addition to their eating habits, vultures have several other repulsive characteris-



Photo by Peter LaTourrette